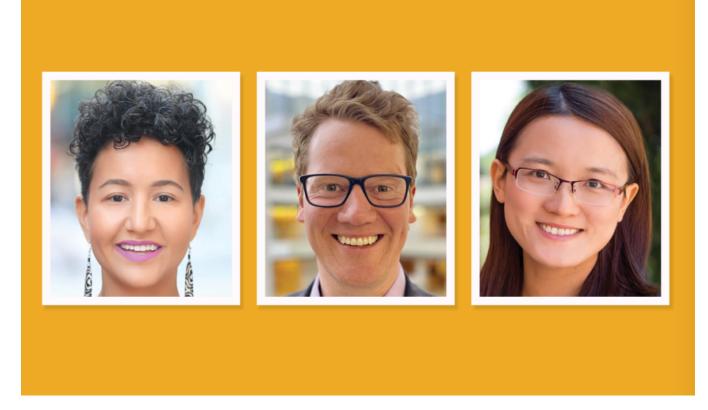# Special Episode I: APS 2023 Spence Awardees on Fresh Starts, Time Perception, and the Well-being of Black Families

March 09, 2023

Research contributions can be transformative in various ways, such as the establishment of new approaches or paradigms within a field of psychological science, or the development or advancement of boundary-crossing research.

The APS Janet Taylor Spence Award recognizes APS members who have made transformative early career contributions to psychological science.

The [APS 2023 Janet Taylor Spence Award for Transformative Early Career Contributions](#) joined Ludmila Nunes to talk about their research and careers. In this episode, the first of two, Riana Elyse Anderson, Ed O'Brien, and Hengchen Dai discussed how to study and improve the well-being and functioning of Black families, the importance of time in how people perceive progress, and how fresh starts can feel motivating.

Read more [here](#).

Unedited transcript:

[00:00:11.650] – Ludmila Nunes

Psychological science research contributions can be transformative in various ways, such as by establishing new approaches or paradigms within a subfield of psychological science or developing or advancing boundary crossing research. Every year since 2010, the APS Janet Taylor Spence Award has recognized a select group of particularly creative and promising APS members who have made transformative early career contributions to psychological science. I am Ludmila Nunes and this is under the Cortex. In two special episodes of the podcast, I talk with the six awardees of the APS Janet Taylor Spence Award for transformative early career contributions about their remarkable research and careers thus far. In this episode, Riana Elyse Anderson, Ed O'Brien, and Hengchen Dai join me to discuss how to study and improve the wellbeing and functioning of Black families, the importance of time in how people perceive progress, and how fresh starts can feel motivating.

[00:01:51.810] – Ludmila Nunes

I have with me Riana Elyse Anderson. She's an assistant professor in the Department of Health, Behavior and Health Education at University of Michigan's School of Public Health. She is also a 2022 2023 fellow at the center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. In 2015, she earned her PhD in Clinical and Community psychology at the University of Virginia. Her work uses mixed methods in clinical interventions to study racial discrimination and socialization in black families. So racial stress and trauma can be reduced and the psychological wellbeing and family functioning can be improved. Hi, Riana, thank you so much for joining me today.

[00:02:38.530] – Riana Elyse Anderson

Thanks so much for having me.

[00:02:40.390] – Ludmila Nunes

So I described your trajectory somewhat and a little bit about your research, but can you talk to us about your current field of research and why you got the interest in this field?

[00:02:52.380] – Riana Elyse Anderson

Sure, and I love to actually take it back to me growing up in my childhood. And so anyone who's met me knows that the word Detroit is a central part of my being. It's where I was born and raised and where I returned to for the past four years at the University of Michigan and would make the commute to Ann Arbor. So Detroit is a place where we saw so much of the early racial flight. And what happens when you have tension among races within our urban space? What happens when sprawl occurs? What happens when folks leave out of communities and there is intentional disinvestment? So I grew up with that as my backdrop. So when I think about why I study racism today and why I think about the mental health and well being of folks of color, it's because that was my backdrop. I grew up with it every day. And now I'm really committed to figuring out how can we have more equitable communities? How can the next Rihanna, who grows up in Detroit, see a place that is full of promise and is full of reward and strength based perspective rather than deficit or challenge?

[00:03:58.190] – Riana Elyse Anderson

So that's what got me to this point. And what I'm working on now here at Stanford is an app for youth of color when they experience racism, to be able to go to this app, get knowledge, awareness, and skills to support themselves, and to be able to have conversations more competently with those caregivers around them.

[00:04:18.130] – Ludmila Nunes

And is this connected to the Embrace program that you run?

[00:04:23.240] – Riana Elyse Anderson

So embrace or engaging. Managing and bonding through race is a five session therapeutic intervention. So if we had all the time and all the resources in the world, or if someone is really requiring a higher level of care, we would ensure that they would have a program like Embrace to go to. But what we recognized, especially during the pandemic, was that folks needed very quick hands on resources, and often they didn't have time to wait to see a clinician. Sometimes their parents didn't have the answer. And more increasingly, as we're seeing what's going on with anti CRT initiatives, some of the people in classroom settings or in schools are unable, very literally, to talk to them about race. So we wanted to make sure that we had a resource that young people could access directly. So what we've learned from Embrace and studies around Embrace helped to inform a more rapid and applied approach in this application.

[00:05:19.430] – Ludmila Nunes

Yes, I think that's really cool and interesting. So what main challenges do you see right now and in the future?

[00:05:27.190] – Riana Elyse Anderson

Yeah, well, the first week of March 2020, where IRB gave us the green light to go ahead in our community and do the work, and my team, who had been training for half the year, was ready to go into our Detroit neighborhoods, and then the subsequent week got the email that everything was being shut down. You'd never anticipate a global pandemic shutting your work down for years, but in that challenge comes opportunity and comes the ability to pivot. And that's where we took our work directly to Zoom, and we said, how can we get our intervention online? All right, let's get into the lab. Let's figure out how to make this app so that we can give it to young people really quickly.

[00:06:06.890] – Ludmila Nunes

So it actually sounds to me that you turn this challenge into the opportunity to reach even more people beyond the specific community, because now you're creating something that can be used globally.

[00:06:20.970] – Riana Elyse Anderson

Absolutely.

[00:06:22.730] – Ludmila Nunes

And do you have more exciting plans for the future? I know you're focused in developing this app right now, but are you thinking long term what you'd like to be doing?

[00:06:32.110] – Riana Elyse Anderson

Oh, my gosh. That question is really a tough one, especially again, because in the development of a business, there is a beautiful balance that you have to strike. You have to say, let me find proof of concept on this thing that I'm doing right now. But then you see the world of opportunity beyond that. So, yes, we're creating this app for just teens, but I work with family, so I definitely want to add a parent component. Another person on the team works with teachers, so we want to add that component. All of us are clinicians, so we want to be able to train clinicians more effectively in this work. So there's so many other elements in this galaxy that we're seeing beyond just the child that we want to build onto. So we certainly see the galaxy. It's there. We want to be able to support young people in all of the spaces that they inhabit. And I think it's going to be more important for me in this moment to say, let's just focus on the youth. Let me make sure that this works, because that's actually harder for me to do than to think about the future.

[00:07:31.900] – Ludmila Nunes

Yes, that makes a lot of sense. Finally, I would like to ask you if you have any advice you would give to graduate students, other researchers, or in your case, even people looking into creating a business and translating these basic research into real world applications.

[00:07:50.230] – Riana Elyse Anderson

Absolutely. So you can't think about the rewards inside of the A Academy. You can't think about, to me, tenure as the goal. You have to set your North Star early on. You have to ask yourself, for whom am I doing this work? Why is this important? What are the outcomes that I want to see in the world? It requires a change from how a lot of us were trained to really stay super focused, to keep our head down, to only look at one small area of our work, and to write a paper to write this grant. But for me, that is not central. So I really just want to make sure. I'm going back to that story of Detroit that I talked about at the beginning. How can I ensure that the next generation of Detroiters are supported with love and with wholeness and with the best data that we have to support them? And by doing that, those other income of rewards within the system may come.

[00:08:54.650] – Ludmila Nunes

Thank you so much for joining me and speaking to our listeners.

[00:08:58.490] – Riana Elyse Anderson

Thank you.

[00:09:00.190] – Ludmila Nunes

So I have with me Riana Elyse Anderson, one of the Spence Awards recipients.

[00:09:16.750] – Ludmila Nunes

Ed O'Brien is an associate professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago Booth's School of Business. He was named an APS Rising Star in 2016, only two years after completing his PhD at the University of Michigan. His research examines the power of situations, specifically temporal contexts, over how people understand themselves and the social world. Current topics of interest include experienced enjoyment, time, use, and wellbeing, and differences in how people respond to improvement versus decline. He's one of the Spence Awardees of this year, and it's a pleasure to have Ed with us today. Welcome to Under the Cortex.

[00:10:01.880] – Ed O'Brien

Thank you so much, Ludmila. I appreciate it.

[00:10:04.130] – Ludmila Nunes

So I gave a very brief overview about your research topics but we would love to know more about what you're interested in and what motivated these interests.

[00:10:14.850] – Ed O'Brien

Yes. So as you said, my background is in social psychology, and I kind of focus on social cognition, about temporal contexts. So I'm really interested in this idea of how people make sense of how they've changed over time, how somebody else has changed over time, how the world has changed over time. Have things gotten better? Have things gotten worse? I'm interested in this because there's often not an obvious right answer. So for some matters of change, it's just obvious and uncontroversial. When things have become different, like when January 1 comes, that's when the new year happens. That's kind of obvious. But a lot of those richer kind of changes in self and others, when somebody has reformed from a bad state to a good state, or are they officially happy or unhappy in their relationships, it's really kind of a judgment call. And so I'm really interested in that judgment process, how people come up with answers and how those answers affect their behavior.

[00:11:08.710] – Ludmila Nunes

And what have you found in some of your research? Do these change over time? What factors are basically changing? How people make judgments and their memories, even, I would guess.

[00:11:20.380] – Ed O'Brien

Yeah, so the interesting thing I think, is people often come up with answers about how things have changed that are independent from the actual evidence. So you can show them evidence of happiness fluctuating or health fluctuating over time, and they do something else beyond just responding to the evidence. Like, okay, based on this, I think things are getting better or things are getting worse. There's kind of other judgment processes at play. So, for example, one thing I found is people are really attuned to signs of decline versus improvement. So even if you kind of hold the objective quality of the evidence constant, people kind of dismiss the improvement side. They think, Well, I don't think things are officially getting better just yet, but based on the same exact evidence, on the negative end, they're

quick to think, based on this, I think all hope is lost. Things are officially declining in a lasting way. Another thing I found is, again, that kind of influences behavior in interesting ways. So to the extent you think that things have officially declined even when they haven't, you might prematurely give up. And that's kind of a problem for present behavior if you think things have improved over time and that actually doesn't track with reality, you might think, for example, I don't need to invest resources in moving this thing along anymore, right?

[00:12:36.000] – Ed O'Brien

We've already fixed the problem, so we can worry about something else. If the problem is not actually fixed, that's also going to create challenges.

[00:12:43.830] – Ludmila Nunes

Okay, so your research is really interesting, and recently there was an article you wrote in Psychological Science called Losing Sight of Piecemeal Progress. People lump in these missimprovement efforts that fall short of categorical change despite improving. And this is kind of related to what you were explaining to us, right?

[00:13:06.520] – Ed O'Brien

Yeah, it's another kind of form of that negativity dominance. The decline pops out to us faster than improvement. So there we found people often have good intentions in setting clear improvement goals. So we try to be concrete about how much better we need to get. So we set these goals. And one potential problem with that is when we work to improve or somebody else out there is working to improve towards that goal, when they fall short of that concrete mark, we often kind of dismiss it as it wasn't worth it at all. Even when there are distinctions in how well you could still do under that goal, So some people could still have improved more than others, but when they all fall under the categorical threshold, we kind of dismiss them all as all the same. Again, another form of thinking. Things have declined greater to a greater degree than they might have.

[00:13:54.280] – Ludmila Nunes

And this has practical implications. When we think, for example, about attempts to eradicate major problems like climate change, when these attempts fail, or they seem to fail, people tend to dismiss the small but critical steps that could have helped address this problem. Right?

[00:14:14.180] – Ed O'Brien

Exactly. So when we miss a big target, which we might often do with these big important world changes that we're working towards, we might not have the ideal goal met, but there's still as important progress to be made. So there's still distinctions in even if we miss the climate change goals that we have, we still want to live in a relatively better world than not. And the risk here is people kind of check out and they say, well, if we miss that main target, then what's the point? The world is coming to an end anyway and that's just not true. There's still gradations there that we should work towards.

[00:14:45.530] – Ludmila Nunes

And looking to the future, do you see any major challenges with your research?

[00:14:52.830] – Ed O'Brien

Yeah, I mean, thinking about how people navigate their changing selves in a changing world, it's a complicated story for people to figure out. One thing I think moving forward is how the role of technology could affect this process. Technology is amazing for lots of reasons. One thing it's doing is it's preserving our pasts in ways that are kind of unprecedented. So even thinking about the photos we share, the posts that we share, the videos that we share, it's almost unprecedented in how much of that stuff is now going to live forever online, kind of bits and pieces of our past. On the one hand, you might think that could help people make sense of change. We have a good record of how we used to be and that should help us figure out moving forward how things have actually changed. On the other hand, I think this is going to present challenges because it often preserves only half the story. So ten years from now, you can look back on all of your past moments in very clear ways, but a lot of the context is gone. We only kind of remember bits and pieces, so certain things are going to live forever and certain things are kind of lost.

[00:15:56.840] – Ed O'Brien

And so I wonder how technology might end up causing other kinds of problems down the line and figuring out this change thing by making us think we know how we've changed over time. We're kind of confident about that because of the past traces to a greater degree than warranted. Maybe it's more confusing than we think, seeing that, like smiling vacation photo from ten years ago. We think, well, we must have been so happy back then, but it's missing all of the unhappy contexts that might have actually been back then.

[00:16:23.600] – Ludmila Nunes

Yeah, really interesting to study in the future. Ed, it was great speaking with you. Thank you so much for your time.

[00:16:31.570] – Ed O'Brien

Thanks so much. I really appreciate it.

[00:16:43.570] – Ludmila Nunes

Hengchen Dai received her PhD in 2015 from the Wharton School, university of Pennsylvania. She's currently an associate professor of management and organizations and behavioral decision making at UCLA Anderson School of Management. Her research has made key contributions to our understanding of what motivates behavior change, and she has also identified important factors that shape motivation and self control. From the policy perspective. Her work seeks to understand the effects of managerial interventions beyond their immediate impact. So what are the longlasting effects of these managerial interventions and what are their positive and negative effects? Hengchen, thank you so much for joining me today. Welcome to under the cartex.

[00:17:39.490] – Hengchen Dai

Hi, thanks so much for having me.

[00:17:42.290] – Ludmila Nunes

So I'm very interested in your research. I already gave some hints to our listeners about what you study, but I really want you to talk about the fresh start effect and your research in general.

[00:17:56.630] – Hengchen Dai

So in general, my research looks at factors that shape individuals motivation and self control capacity. I take three angles to understand motivational factors. The first one is the interpersonal angle. I try to understand when people would have higher motivation than usual and when their motivation would come and go. And then the second angle is more social, just to understand what are the social forces that shape motivation. And the third angle is about policy. It's about how we can design interventions to change people's motivations so they would engage in behavior that would be beneficial for themselves in the long run and will be beneficial for the society. In terms of the fresh start effect. That fits into the first angle where I look at the interpersonal conflict when people have to decide whether to do something that's beneficial for the long term, such as eating healthy food and exercising versus doing something that's more fun and easy in the moment, such as eating delicious but unhealthy snack or sitting on the couch and watching TV. And the First Story Effect identifies situational factors that would make people more or less motivated to pursue their goals. In particular, I find that at the beginning of a new time period, such as the beginning of a new year, new month, a new week, new season, or for students, would be the beginning of a new school year, people experience greater than usual motivation to pursue their personal and professional goals.

[00:19:32.690] – Hengchen Dai

And partly it is because people now feel psychologically distinct from the past self. So the past itself may fail to pursue the goal that's the old me, I'm different now. I have a change this time. I can do better. And that type of old me and new me contrast and the psychology that I'm different now partially can motivate people to pursue their goals even though they have failed in the past. And another reason that First Story Effect may exist is the beginning of a time period may also be associated with bigger picture thinking. People tend to take a step back and review their progress and think about goals that are worthwhile pursuing. So both psychological process self efficacy, the contrast with pastel and flash, the big picture thinking, may contribute to the elevated motivation people experience at the beginning of a new time period.

[00:20:32.330] – Ludmila Nunes

So could this Fresh Start effect be used artificially induced with interventions to make actually people become more motivated to pursue behavioral change?

[00:20:44.590] – Hengchen Dai

That's a great question. Something that we have tried is to highlight the salience of Fresh Start moment,

especially moments that people may not naturally think about. So, for example, in the lab, we actually highlight a future date as either the first day of spring or the third March. Sorry, either the first day of spring or the third Thursday in March, and it's actually the identical day. But we label it differently. And people do not automatically naturally think about a given day as Spree Aginox. So by highlighting it, we actually make it silly to them that this is the beginning of a new season and we see elevated interest in beginning pursuing goals on that day if we frame it as Spring Aginox on the first day of Spring. And also in the field, we conducted an experiment in collaboration with four universities involving thousands of employees, and we encourage them to sign up for retirement savings plans. And there we also manipulated whether or not a future date was framed as just a few months later, like a random day a few months later, or framed as after the first day of Spring. And we also find that people are more motivated to sign up to save after a future date that is associated with the first of Spring than that is associated with an ordinary day in a few months.

[00:22:21.070] – Ludmila Nunes

Do you want to tell us about any projects you're currently working on or your future plans for research?

[00:22:28.830] – Hengchen Dai

Yeah. So Fresh Start Effective represents a lot of work that I have had since I was a PhD student. But actually my current work looks at more broadly how to design behavioral interventions to change people's motivations. So it goes beyond the fresh start effect. And some of my recent interest is in understanding the reproducibility and scalability of behavioral interventions. Sometimes we see that a promising intervention that is identified by some scholars fails to generate the same effect, either failed to produce statistically significant results or failed to produce failed to produce any effects of a similar magnitude as the prior research. And that is puzzling. And that discrepancy we observe across studies may lead some people to question the value of behavioral science for policymakers. And the perspective I've been taking in my recent research is that it's less about whether behavioral interventions work, it's about when it works, among whom, and on what type of outcome measures. So in some of my recent research, I try to systematically understand how the effectiveness of behavioral interventions varies with the way we assess. The efficacy varies with the baseline motivation of the subpopulation that we are examining and it also varies with the psychological construe of the population we're examining.

[00:24:06.650] – Hengchen Dai

Right? So how people actually infer the design, how people actually interpret why certain interventions are implemented and that inferences could influence people's response to the intervention. So I'm taking a more holistic approach to understand when behavioral interventions would work, what outcome measure for what individual, in what context, versus it may fail, even though it's basically the same behavioral intervention.

[00:24:41.850] – Ludmila Nunes

So basically the variables that might determine whether an intervention fails or is successful.

[00:24:49.220] – Hengchen Dai

That's a great succinct way to explain what I'm excited about.

[00:24:53.550] – Ludmila Nunes

That's great. Do you think that you're going to encounter challenges to this type of research in the future? Or if you want to tell us about any challenges you've been encountering?

[00:25:09.410] – Hengchen Dai

I think for this line of work you do need a multi method approach with a particular emphasis on field experiment. Because for behavioral science to actually inform policy, I think it's important for us to test the robustness of evidence in the field rather than just from online experiments or using evidence from laboratory experiments. As a result, it's always going to be a challenge. But it's also exciting undertake for me to look for field partners who would be willing to test different behavioral interventions in their field context across policy relevant behaviors. And also I need to have large scale field experiment in order to have rich data about individual members so I can conduct a nuanced analysis about heterogeneous responses to my intervention. And my hope is to generate some sort of framework that allow us to better predict when people would respond better to an intervention. And that does require that I have reached data sets at an individual level so that combination like both field experiments and large scale and access to reach individual level data would be a challenge. But again, I think it's a very exciting undertake. And also, how can we go from those idiosyncratic heterogeneous treatment effects to actually synthesize a framework?

[00:26:39.190] – Hengchen Dai

That's another challenge. But again, I think that would be a way for me to make a key contribution, is to go beyond heterogeneous treatment effect that I have been idiosyncratically documented in prior research and then try to synthesize a more coherent framework to predict those sources of heterogeneity and can.

[00:26:58.810] – Ludmila Nunes

Be very helpful for any type of interventions across fields, I'm sure.

[00:27:03.860] – Hengchen Dai

Totally. And in order to test the genius ability, ideally I would actually apply the framework in different field context.

[00:27:11.530] – Ludmila Nunes

Finally, I just want to ask you if you can give some advice to graduate students, or even undergraduate students about how to create a successful and impactful line of research.

[00:27:27.230] – Hengchen Dai

I think my number one suggestion would be tenacity. I was told when I was first year students that

tenacity is probably the number one important quality for a great researcher. And I personally have experienced the value of tennisity, and in particular, when you want to conduct a field experiments, it does require that you try many times, so many times in terms of convincing a field partner to run experiments and actually successfully launching a field experiments. And I think in order to do impactful work, obviously, I don't think doing impactful work can only be achieved in the field, but at least for the type of research I do, field work is important, but it's also high risk and it requires persistence. And be willing to open yourself up to many field partners and eventually expecting only one or two would actually work. And that require just try an error persistence. So that's one thing that I really want to highlight.

[00:28:31.810] – Ludmila Nunes

Henshaw, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. It was great having you.

[00:28:38.550] – Hengchen Dai

Thank you. Thank you for your time.